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PP RUEHDE RUEHDIR
DE RUEHRH #2356/01 3310916
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 270916Z NOV 07
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7089
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 002356

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DHAHRAN SENDS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/18/2017
TAGS: [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SOCI](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: THE "SAUDIZATION" OF SERMONS IN THE EP

REF: RIYADH 01058

Classified By: Consul General John Kincannon for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: According to conversations with worshippers at various Eastern Province mosques, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MOIA) began a policy of "Saudizing" the delivery of the Friday sermon during the late summer of 2007. The alleged policy allows only Saudi citizens licensed by the MOIA to serve as the "khateeb," the mosque official that delivers sermons, while seeming to permit exceptions for politically well-connected foreign preachers. The policy does not apply to imams, as foreign citizens continue to serve as prayer leaders. While the MOIA appears to be intervening more actively in the appointment of prayer leaders in the Eastern Province, it is unclear to Post if this is a SAG policy seeking to moderate religious expression. END SUMMARY

"Saudizing" Mosques

¶2. (C) Post received information from various sources that the SAG's Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MOIA) began "Saudizing" mosques in late summer 2007 by prohibiting non-Saudi "khateeb," or Islamic preachers, from giving sermons. This policy is reportedly being enforced throughout the Eastern Province (EP), although Post is aware of at least two khateeb that have averted prohibition thanks to their popularity and powerful connections.

¶3. (C) Contacts first noted the recent increase in MOIA intervention in the case of the popular, politically-minded Islamic leader Sheikh Mohammad al-Qahtani, a Saudi national. Until July 2007, al-Qahtani led the Ahmad bin Hanbal Mosque located in al-Khobar. He attracted large crowds with his powerful and often politically-charged sermons, regularly involving topics such as Israel, Iraq, and U.S. foreign policy. Subsequently, al-Qahtani went on extended leave, only returning in the second week of October to lead prayers and deliver an Eid sermon. Even during this brief Eid return, however, al-Qahtani did not deliver the Friday sermon, considered the most important of the holiday. In his place, the MOIA has sent rotating substitute imams. Deprived of their charismatic leader, worshippers at the mosque are reportedly unhappy and attendance at this major mosque is dropping.

¶4. (C) The MOIA also removed an Egyptian sheikh at the small Mubarak al-Suwaiket mosque, located in al-Khobar, in early September 2007. He continues to serve as the mosque's imam, but in a recurring province-wide trend, the role of khateeb is now filled by a rotating representative who is sent by the MOIA on a weekly basis. Worshippers at Mubarak al-Suwaiket are similarly upset with the policy. As a result of the

assigned khateeb's absence, there was no prayer offered on the first Friday of Ramadan. The Egyptian khateeb was in attendance that day, but stood by without stepping forward when the assigned substitute failed to arrive.

15. (C) In a slightly more complicated case, Post contacts report that popular imam and khateeb Sheikh Abd al-Qadir Abdullah Badouk, who formerly led the Rahma Grand Mosque of al-Khobar and enjoyed a large following extending to other GCC states, continues to be held at the Riyadh interrogation center of the General Directorate for Investigation. Abd al-Qadir, a Yemeni-national of Eritrean birth, was reportedly arrested in February 2007 on charges of aiding terrorism when his name appeared on documents found with a weapons cache and SR 20 million in cash. After being cleared and released from prison, Abd al-Qadir was arrested again in July on charges of money laundering (NOTE: At that time, businessman Ma'an al-Sane'a employed Abd al-Qadir as purchasing manager of the Saad group. Some contacts suggest that Abd al-Qadir's July arrest is related to his benefactor's previous legal problems (reftel). END NOTE). The sheikh's followers claim that the SAG invented false charges to discredit the moderate religious leader. Abd al-Qadir is reportedly disliked by the Saudi religious establishment because of his popularity as a faith healer (he ran a faith healing clinic until it was shut down by the SAG in 1999) and his promotion of interfaith dialogue.

Exceptions to the Rule

16. (C) Post contacts report that despite the new government policy, there are at least two cases in which political power

RIYADH 00002356 002 OF 002

and "wasta" has earned foreign khateeb a respite from "Saudization." Imam/khateeb Sheikh Mohammad Saleh al-Munajjid, a Syrian national, continues to serve as the leader of the important Omar bin Abdulaziz Grand Mosque, delivering sermons to a large following. Al-Munajjid, generally seen as an extremist voice, has been affiliated with this mosque since its opening in the late 1980s and is a local investor with substantial property and media holdings. HRH Prince Abd al-Aziz bin Ahmad, son of Vice Interior Minister Ahmad bin Abdulaziz, constructed the mosque that al-Munajjid leads. However, it is possible that al-Munajjid has been spared because he is the preferred preacher of the area's religious establishment, evidenced by the fact that many members of the Mutawwa'in attend both his Friday prayers and weekly Tuesday night lectures.

17. (C) A second example of a foreign khateeb who continues to preach is liberal imam/khateeb Sheikh Adel al-Ghunaim, an Egyptian whose followers are largely foreign nationals. Al-Ghunaim, an associate professor for Islamic studies at King Faisal University in Dammam, has been imam and khateeb of the Anas bin Malik Grand Mosque since the mosque's inception in 1982. Unlike al-Munajjid, al-Ghunaim's son-in-law reports that the sheikh's continued presence has less to do with his importance and more to do with the power of his benefactors, the al-Zamil family. The al-Zamils, among the Eastern Province's wealthiest billionaire families, built and continue to fund the Anas bin Malik Grand Mosque. Post contacts report that when the MOIA requested the al-Zamils remove al-Ghunaim, family head Hamid al-Zamil refused. Al-Ghunaim's son-in-law told Post that Hamid, former President of the National Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry, refused to remove the sheikh until the SAG could find a leader equal in knowledge and acceptance among worshippers. The MOIA has not made another demand.

18. (C) COMMENT: This report represents numerous conversations between FSNs and regular worshippers and insiders at various Eastern Province mosques and has not been confirmed by SAG

officials. It is clear that there is greater MOIA intervention in managing key mosques in the region and that some attempts are being made to "Saudize" the clergy at these mosques. However, "wasta" and influence networks play a large role in foiling MOIA interventions. It remains unclear if this reflects a concerted Saudi strategy to moderate preaching at major mosques in the region. END COMMENT.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)
GFOELLER